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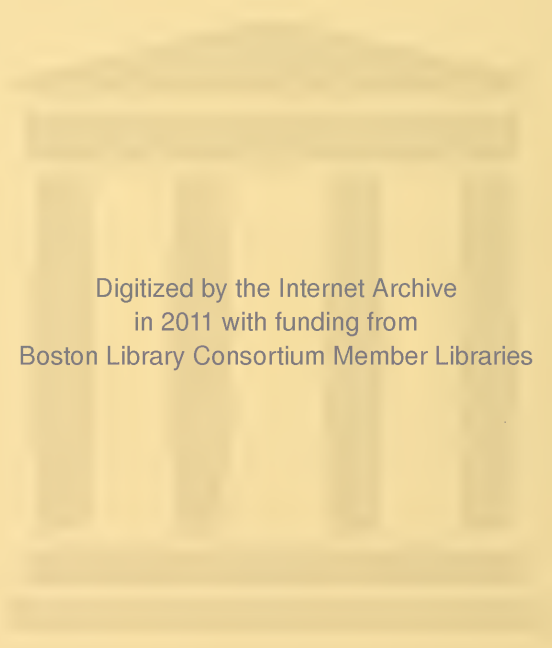
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Modern Methods

In the

Country Church



THE NEW CHURCH BUILDING

By

Matthew Brown McNutt

Modern Methods In The Country Church

An address delivered before the
McCormick Seminary
Alumni Association

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MODERN METHODS IN THE COUNTRY CHURCH

Mr. President, Fellow Alumni and Brethren:

More than half the people of our great nation still live in the country. And until some short cut is discovered for producing food the agricultural regions will continue to be peopled. These millions must be supplied with the Bread of Life. The country church, therefore, has and will have a mission for years to come.

The methods employed in the country churches to-day are, to a greater or less extent, either those transplanted from the town and the city or they are methods that were in use fifty years ago—the one class of methods is as ill adapted to the modern needs of the country as the other.

Perhaps the country church of the past was all that was needed in its day or was as good as the country people could then afford. But the new era of scientific farming and the introduction of the modern comforts and conveniences into the country homes have brought a new demand for and made possible better things for the rural churches.

What the country church needs is to work out its own problems from the country point of view. It needs to devise ap-

propriate methods and to evolve and build up a type of life fitting into the needs of the country people as we find them to-day.

A great deal depends upon the methods employed in doing any kind of work successfully, though the mode and manner has not everything to do with it. I am not a crank on methods. It goes without saying that without God we "can do nothing," no matter how good the methods. However, without placing any limitations on the Almighty, I believe that God can dispense his grace more advantageously and effectively through common sense methods and a first-class equipment than he can through slipshod methods and a poor equipment. He can and does sometimes use the weak and foolish things, but he certainly does not prefer weak and foolish things to serve him rather than the strong and wise.

The Jews brought to the altar of sacrifice the firstlings of the flock—that which was without spot and without blemish—and the custom was significant. It teaches us that all church work should proceed on the principle that nothing is too good for service in the kingdom of Christ. From nothing, nothing comes, is as true in the kingdom of grace as it is anywhere else. It has been said that "Order is heaven's

first law." If that is true, then, if earth is to become heavenly, the business of earth must be done "decently and in order." The country church has yet to learn the value of modern methods and the superior advantage of a first-class equipment.

I do not know that I can serve you any better to-day, than to tell you of some experiments which I have been conducting in a country church the last ten years. And I hope I can do it modestly without seeming to exploit myself. So many men deal in generalities in speaking and writing on the country church that it may be refreshing to you to hear a description of some country methods in actual operation.



THE OLD CHURCH BUILDING

Ten years ago last spring I went directly from McCormick Seminary to Du Page

Church—a country field thirty miles west of Chicago and six miles from the nearest railroad. It is surrounded by no town or village;—the church and manse stand alone on the open prairie.

It is one of the oldest churches in Illinois. The people are an average country folk of Scotch, English, Irish, and German descent. The congregation was then worshipping in a frame structure built half a century before. It was the old type of church architecture—one room, boxy, straight board seats, small plain glass windows and with scarcely any furnishings.

The church and manse lots, enclosed by the remnant of a wire fence, were veritable weed patches. North of the church stood some old tumble-down sheds, the sight of which made every passer-by shudder and think to himself, “Surely the Lord hath deserted this place.” The manse had the same neglected appearance and everything about the place reminded one of a man who had gone away on a long journey and had forgotten to leave any one in care of his abode.

One of the elders, a farmer, had been preaching for three years, or until he died. The last minister had resigned with \$400 back on his salary, which amount the church borrowed to pay the debt.

No one had united with the church for five years. A club house has been fitted up in the neighborhood to house an organization that called itself "The New Era Club," but whose chief object and amusement turned out to be dancing, though its original promoters had hoped for it something better. Many of the young people of the neighborhood, including church members, were spending evenings there. The dancing element from the surrounding towns had also begun to frequent the place.

The only service the church attempted was to open the doors on Sunday for preaching and Sunday-school. Collections were taken once a year each for missions and ministerial relief, and this was practically the extent of the benevolent work.

Two-thirds of the Sunday-school teachers were members of one family. The three elders were also trustees, and each taught a class in the Sunday-school. One of these elders was also a Sunday-school superintendent, Sunday-school treasurer, church treasurer, and treasurer of benevolences.

All this very discouraging situation existed in the midst of a thrifty and prosperous community where the public roads are paved with gravel, with free delivery

mail, good substantial houses and barns, thoroughbred cattle and all the modern farm machinery in the market.

This run-down condition of the church was not a reflection upon the Church people of the community nor upon those entrusted with the leadership at that time. They were good, earnest, conscientious men and women. No one knew better than they that the affairs of the church were not going well and none deplored more than they the sad and apparently hopeless situation. Had they not been of the right kind of stuff the church would doubtless have disbanded years ago, as many such churches have done. None were more anxious than the Du Page people that the church should grow and prosper, and as a rule they have been ready and willing to adopt the new plans and methods, and are still among the most loyal and efficient workers.

The condition of this church at that time was not exceptional. Other country churches were and are, still, in the same plight. Some people were saying the country church has outlived its usefulness, and that was and is true of the old type of country church. Many such have given up in despair and disbanded. Many others still exist at the same dying rate. What was the matter with this country church?

What is the matter with that type of country church? My diagnosis of the case is, simply, a lack of vision, and the want of adaptation to the new needs.

The Scotch elder that was preaching at Du Page was a very good preacher, they said, an able Bible scholar, and a man of rare and charming personality. His predecessor was a good preacher too, according to reports, but the methods of both were inadequate. There are many good preachers failing in the country to-day for the same reason. They lack adequate conception of the needs; they fail to see the possibilities of country life.

There was a time when preaching and an occasional pastoral visit was all that was demanded of the country parson, and the people were thought to perform their part when they went to church and paid the minister's salary. But it is not so now. What was to be done?

Jesus, the Head of the Church, once said, "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." Believing, therefore, that he intended his church to be a ministering church, I began at Du Page with the idea that religion has to do with the whole man—body, mind, and spirit; that it deeply concerns his social life, his business life.

his education, his amusement, and everything else that pertains to man's well-being.

I was brought up in a country church and the idea I got of it in my boyhood was that the church is a sort of a Sunday affair, which dealt exclusively with men's souls and good clothes. It was also a place of long faces, for if there was any hilarity among the boys at "meetin'", we could always depend upon the hazel brush being brought out when we got home; a place where dead men's bodies were carried, as the funerals were invariably held in the church. Well do I remember also how fearful I was of the preacher, when, clad in his long black broadcloth coat, he would make his annual visits to our home. Two men I greatly feared in those days. One was Mr. Matteer, the preacher, and the other Mr. Turney, the butcher. As boys and young men we never associated our good times with the church or the minister—except the annual union Sunday-school picnic which was really a delightful occasion. The church did not seem to have much to do with our daily lives, or our occupations and amusements. It demanded nothing of us, apparently, but to go to church and sit still. Our companionships were outside of and independent of the church. It was the day of the husking-bees, the apple-

cuttings, the sugaring-offs and all those most delightful, wholesome, and interesting neighborhood pastimes in which old and young alike engaged with such pleasure and profit. What a pity they have gone out of date! It was before the day of commercialized pastimes,—the amusement parks, the public dance halls, the cheap vaudeville and the like. It is alarming how rapidly these modern creatures are creeping in upon the country people in these days of the trolley, the automobile, and the horse and buggy which every young man on the farm now possesses—even the hired men. It is far easier now for the country people to get into the world current than it was forty years ago.

But coming back to the old type of country church, it did not seem to offer us much but a long, dry sermon on Sunday—and it *was* dry to the boys and girls,—hard, straight-backed seats, a book from the Sunday-school library in which the good boy and girl always died and went to heaven, and those delightful annual visits by the pastor!

Now, I love that dear old country church of my boyhood days, back in the hills of Pennsylvania, and I like to think that it did me a great deal more good than I realized either then or now. It might

have done worse. And it is furthest from my purpose to speak disparagingly of it or of the dear people who were its leaders. I love them every one. It perhaps served its day. But the point I am making is that that type of country church will not meet the needs of the country people to-day.

With these recollections of my childhood and the church, I resolved first of all, when I went to Du Page, that I would get next to the boys and girls; that I would make that old church a great center of attraction. Notice I did not say *the* great center. I do not believe in the church attempting to do everything or trying to do things that might better be left to other institutions. But I would make it *a* great center of attraction; a hub of joys, of happy memories and associations for that entire community. I determined, with God's help, to make it an indispensable institution to every man, woman, and child within its reach.

One of the good old Scotch elders, they called him "Uncle Dan,"—one of the dearest and best of men—put his arm around me one day, it was a way he had of greeting everybody, and he said very seriously, the tears rolling down his cheeks, "Our young people have got to dancing and they are

being wooed away from God and the church. How are you going to deal with them?"

I said, "Uncle Dan, I know from experience that young people will dance if they have nothing better to do. I propose to give them something better."

"Well," he continued, "just before you came here our session passed a rule that there was to be no dancing by members of the Church, but I fear there is going to be trouble when we come to enforce it."

I replied again, "Uncle Dan, it is impossible to shut off a stream entirely unless you give it some other outlet."

I set to work, first, and organized an old-fashioned singing school. It might have been anything else just as well—a class in scientific farming, annual husbandry, domestic science, or nature study. I chose the singing-school because I had some knowledge of music. The idea is to have something that will afford a point of contact between the leader and the people, and also to get everybody interested in *doing* something. The singing-school met one night in the week, in the church. There was some good musical talent among the young folks and this new enterprise proved to be a great hit. Out of it grew a good strong chorus choir, a male quartet, a ladies' quartet, an orchestra, and some

good soloists. Besides, it improved the singing in the church and Sunday-school a hundred per cent.

We began at once to observe all the special days—a dozen or more. This kept our musicians busy. And the first thing we knew the young people and many of the “outsiders,” as they were called, were taking part in these special services. They just couldn’t keep out. And, of course, the fathers and mothers had come to hear their children sing and play and speak, and likewise the doting grandparents, and the uncles and aunts and cousins and sweet-hearts all had to come.

Next we started what we called a gospel chorus. We got some live new song-books and went singing around from home to home. At first some of the people were a little shy of the gospel chorus, but soon they were vying with each other to see who would secure these singers. The chorus went to the homes of the aged who were too feeble to come to the meeting-house. It sang for the sick. It sang in the homes of those who never heard any other music.

An athletic association already existed. We encouraged the boys in their field-day sports. Two or three baseball teams were organized. We played successfully many of the surrounding towns including Chicago.

We never challenged the Cubs but we did challenge a team from The Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Chicago, and beat them on our grounds one Fourth of July, 20 to 0. The pastor of the church had come along with his boys, and he kept insisting that we must have some professional players from outside, but they were just the husky farmer lads.

The church building was not suited for social gatherings, so a series of sociables was planned at the different homes. These were not the money-making kind; they were sociables indeed. The older people often attended and engaged in the play with the young folks. Refreshments were served free. At these gatherings special attention was given to strangers and to the backward boys and girls, and a few of us always had upon our hearts those who were not of the fold of Christ. They grew to be a sociable lot of folks, I tell you! They became well acquainted. And such fellowship! Such friendships! Such companionships! And all centering around the church.

The women of the parish had long had a missionary society. One of the mothers said to me one day, "Pastor, don't you think it would be a good thing if we had some kind of a little social circle for our

girls? They are just aching for something to do." I said, "Yes, let us have it." She invited them to her home one afternoon and nine responded. They had a delightful time and they called themselves "The Girls' Mission Band," deciding to meet thereafter once a month. In these little gatherings were combined the devotional, social, educational work, and club features. After the program they would sew and make garments for the poor in the city. A meal is always served at these meetings by the hostess. The "Band" grew and so did the girls. When they became women they changed the name of the Band to "The Young Women's Missionary Society," which now has nearly forty members. As the young women marry, they are transferred to the Women's Society.

A similar work was begun for the young men. It is simply the young men's class in the Sunday-school organized, and is called "The Young Men's Bible Class." It has upwards of fifty members. This class meets every Sunday morning with the Sunday-school for Bible study and is taught by the pastor. Besides, it meets the first Tuesday of each month for fellowship, fun, business, devotions, and for literary and social purposes. Much has to be combined in one meeting, because it

is difficult for people to get together very often in this country.

This class, and the Young Women's Class have become the strong right arm of the church. We are now selecting our teachers and officers for the Sunday-school and church from them.

The young men conduct a lecture course, not for pecuniary profit, but for the sole and only purpose of furnishing wholesome entertainment for the community. We have had some hundred-dollar attractions. The entire community patronize this lecture course without exception and regardless of creed. The Catholics and the German Lutherans attend. People from the surrounding towns are frequently seen in the audiences, driving sometimes ten miles or more.

Another enterprise which the young men's Bible class has introduced and supported is a bureau of publicity. The boys invested in a small printing-press. They, with the assistance of the pastor, do all the church printing and issue a local church paper.

This class has developed some very good speakers and singers. Under its auspices open-air gospel and song services are held in a grove in the summer-time and in the public schoolhouses in winter. These

meetings have been a great blessing to the young men as well as to those to whom they minister. In the pastor's absence on Sunday his Bible class has frequently taken charge of the service, three or four of them giving short gospel talks.

You are wondering what became of the dancing? Well, they forgot all about it in about two years, and there has not been a dance in the New Era Hall for over eight years. The building stands idle and is crumbling to ruin. The pastor never mentioned dancing in the pulpit or to a single individual in private. It was simply starved out.

Our Sunday-school is well organized and graded and has three hundred members including the Cradle Roll and the Home Department.

The pledge system of finance has been introduced for the local work and for benevolences as well. Our ideal is a pledge from every man, woman, and child. We have devised an envelope for making payments which answers all purposes. A financial secretary keeps an account with each individual and sends statements at the end of each quarter if necessary. We have found that the pledge system is a great improvement over the old way of taking collections once a year for the

"Boards." This church in the last ten years, in addition to building a \$10,000 edifice, remodeling the manse, making other improvements, and increasing the minister's salary forty per cent., has given to benevolences \$5,270, as against \$6,407 in the fifty years preceding.

As a rule the various societies in the church are not made money-raising institutions. The system for raising money by sociables, fairs, and other devices has been almost entirely abolished.

As an ideal we are working toward the entire support, ourselves, of both a home and foreign missionary.

The Sunday-school and the morning preaching service are the only meetings held on Sunday. A Sunday evening service is not adapted to the conditions in this community at the present time, and we do not attempt it except on special occasions. Nor is there a mid-week service held for the same reason.

The cottage prayer-meeting is the best for the country, dividing the parish into groups of twelve or fifteen members each, all the groups meeting on the same evening and each having its own leader, organist, and chorister. The leaders may form the pastor's cabinet. The various business

plans of the church may be talked over at these meetings.

There have been no evangelistic services in this church by professional evangelists for ten years. Formerly, this was a favorite method. Such distinguished evangelists as Moody and Sankey, and Majors Cole and Whittle have conducted meetings in the Du Page Church. And these were successful too. But there is not another ten year period in the history of the church that shows as many accessions as the last decade.

The one by one method as illustrated by the Master and by Andrew and Philip, has been used. A great deal of the evangelistic work is done through the Sunday-school. Every class is a personal work class. The teachers are encouraged to lead their pupils in personal work.

Great care is taken to press the claims of Christ and the church upon the young. The parents co-operate with the pastor in this work of dealing with the young. This is done through pastoral visitation and through pastoral letters. Occasional sermons are preached to the children, and a Christian training-class is conducted for those who are about to enter the church. There have been few communion services when there was not somebody to unite with

the church, and between communion seasons members have been received. There is scarcely a person in the parish between the ages of ten and twenty-one years of age who is not a member of the church.

This church has learned the value of inspirational meetings. Two principal ones are held each year. One takes place on New-year's eve, when the whole community, old and young, gather at the church as one family to watch the old year die and to welcome in the new. This is no common "watch service." The evening is planned to overflow with good and interesting things.

The other great inspirational meeting is held at the close of the church year. It is an all-day meeting, and the whole countryside turn out to help round up the year's work. The ladies serve a banquet at noon, free of charge. There is always good music on the occasions and two or three good participants from outside supplement the home talent. These big meetings are a great uplift to the country people. They promote friendship and good fellowship, and the dead-level gait always receives a severe jolt.

Other inspirational meetings are held for particular organizations in the church. The Young Men's Bible Class held one not

long since, attended by one hundred young men.

Eventually this church outgrew the old building, and it rose up and erected a new one, costing, including furnishings, \$10,000 in money and the equivalent of another thousand in hauling which the farmers did gratis. Practically all the money was subscribed before a shovelful of earth was moved for the foundation. No offering was taken at the dedication for building purposes or for furnishings. Every person in the community was given opportunity to help build the new church. And all responded heartily. The Catholics and German Lutherans contributed to the building fund and helped to haul the materials.

The new structure is Gothic in design and is built of brick. The interior is finished in red oak. A handsome fresco in water-colors adorns the walls, with panels of burlap below the surbase molding. This with the beautiful art glass windows gives the interior a most pleasing and homelike appearance. The floors are covered with cork carpet. The main auditorium has a bowl-shaped floor and seats three hundred people. The assembly-room of the Sunday-school apartment, which is separated from the auditorium by accordion doors, has an additional one hundred and fifty

sittings. There are fourteen rooms in all, including a number of classrooms, choir and cloak rooms, toilet, pastor's study, vestibule, kitchen, dining-hall, cistern, and furnace and fuel rooms. The building is heated with hot air furnaces and lighted with gas. A system of water-works supplies water wherever needed about the building.

A library has been started which already has a thousand volumes. It is purposed to put in a line of reference books. A number of study courses are being planned in scientific agriculture, civil government, sociology, nature study, and domestic science.

There is a prevalent idea among the country people that the young folks must go away from home to get an education. When they get it they seldom come back to the farm. A very large per cent. of the country boys and girls never complete the eighth grade in the common schools. They think their opportunity for getting an education is past when they leave the public school to work on the farm, if they think about it at all. We are seeking to revive the "fireside university" and to teach the country people the possibilities of home study. It is not the purpose of the church, in doing this, to become a knowledge-

imparting institution, but rather to create an atmosphere of research in the community, to foster the spirit of inquiry and investigation of truth, and to afford occasion and opportunity for such investigation

To sum up the principles underlying these methods: Make the church a ministering institution. Let it be many-sided. Let it seek to serve the whole man, body, mind, and spirit, rather than the spirit alone. Let it seek to make this a new earth by teaching the people to do *all* things to the glory of God. Let them know that honest toil is sacred, that innocent amusement is holy, and that these are also ways of praising and glorifying God as well as the Sunday devotions. Let the church seek to discover to men their talents, and then encourage and help them in their development. Distribute the responsibilities as widely as capacity for efficiency will warrant. Lead everybody into doing something useful for somebody else. Make the church to minister to the whole community rather than to a particular body in the community, the aim being, not to make Presbyterians or Baptists or Methodists or Catholics, but to create an atmosphere in the neighborhood to breathe in, which will help Presbyterians to be better Presby-

terians, Baptists better Baptists, Methodists better Methodists, Catholics better Catholics, and all better men and women,—an atmosphere that will inspire to higher thinking and nobler living.

Let there be as much preaching of the gospel as ever—and more—for the gospel of Christ is still “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth,” but let there be more of the spirit of Christ in ministering to men. Make it easy for people to do right, and as hard as possible for them to do wrong.

There is plenty of good solid work to be done in the country church. “The harvest truly is plenteous but the laborers are few.” It is astonishing how few men the Lord seems to be calling to our country churches. I say it reverently. How many ministers are preaching in the country churches because they love the work and realize its importance? Too few. A great many ministers are staying in the rural churches not from choice, but from force of circumstances. They are old and almost worn out, or they are sick, or have missed their calling and imagine the country folk will not know it, or if they are young they feel too inexperienced to tackle a city church. So they practise awhile on the farmers until they learn their business and

the Lord calls them to a larger (?) sphere of usefulness in some city.

The country needs ministers of strength and vigor in body and mind, who choose the rural work first of all because of its importance and because of the great need, and who come determined to stay it through.

Here is a work that calls for dauntless courage, the brightest talents, and the most heroic and self-sacrificing spirits. Let no minister of the gospel be afraid or ashamed to take charge of a country church and "be buried from the world," as some have put it.

And if any one undertakes such a work, let him stick to it. The hope of the country church is the long pastorate. And let no one engaged in this work be keeping his head up in the air all the time, looking around for a bigger place. The chances are the man who does that is not big enough to fill the place he has. Magnify the work! Make of the little church a big church,—large in helpful ministries, great in discovering and utilizing opportunities for service, wonderful in seeing and realizing the possibilities of country life. Whoever does this will be doing one of the noblest and one of the most needed services for his country and for mankind.

Colonel Roosevelt has well said: "In the last analysis the man on the farm is the man upon whom our whole civilization rests. The growth and progress of the country depends upon him. I want to see conditions kept favorable for him and for his wife."

Does a mother feel that her sphere is narrow or that her work is in vain when she rears noble sons and daughters for her country? It is the supreme prerogative of the country minister to shape the early lives of presidents, statesmen, preachers, teachers, missionaries, and business men, and to conserve the physical strength and the moral and intellectual vigor of the whole human race by leading the country people in truth and righteousness, and it is one of the biggest businesses on earth.





